Hello, I’m Sarah Mahoney, an occupational health physiotherapist. Here’s some simple information to help you recognise poor working techniques with your desktop accessories.

The same principles and good work habits apply to working on a laptop, a desktop computer, mobile devices; whether at the same desk each day or if you’re hot desking. Always consider the length of time you’re in one position or performing a repetitive task, and the strain you are causing to various areas of your body. There is a great saying, “The next posture is the best posture”.

I’ve talked about the chair and the footrest on a separate section, and there are a number of choices you have when setting up your workstation. You have to think about what you are doing, and the length of time that you are doing it.

A good monitor arm needs to be easily adjustable so that you can get your screen height up to the level where the top of the screen is level with your eyebrows. Your eyes then look 15 degrees down to the centre of the working screen. You tilt the bottom of the screen so that the screen is facing your eyes and not your chest. If you are using two screens you want to make sure that they are not one above the other, but side by side. Also the top of the two screens should be level and they should be in a V, a gentle V, facing you – not flat screens.

Are you a regular number cruncher? Did you know you can separate the numeric pad from the keyboard to allow flexibility in positioning?

If you are using a laptop like this for any length of time, you’re in a very poor position ergonomically. The screen is too low and too close. Your hands are working on a small keyboard and your position is very crunched up. Using a laptop stand for your laptop puts the machine into a much better ergonomic position for your body. The screen is at arm's length, it's raised to eyebrow height. You can’t use that keyboard, you have to have a separate keyboard and a separate mouse.

Does your keyboard fit your hand size? If you are typing with the wrist angle out of alignment with the forearm you need to change the keyboard to correct this, as the forearm muscles will be overworking and the wrist joint will be under pressure. There should be a straight line through the hand, wrist and forearm as you type, with no deviation. So this keyboard is a better fit for this person. The normal keyboard has a flat surface which causes the forearms to be fully rolled over, or pronated, as you work. If you experience forearm or wrist pain you might like to try a keyboard with a shaped surface like this, to reduce the forearm pronation.

Using the mouse in a poor position or with a bad technique can lead to problems. Bad techniques include:

- Working with the arm outstretched. This causes a lot of strain in the forearm, upper arm and shoulders.
- Working with the wrist deviating, swivelling to the side, causes a lot of wrist pain and forearm pain.
- Overuse of the scroll wheel causes tendon tightness and these tendons come from muscles up in your forearm so the pain can be either here or here.

Some ways to correct these issues with the mouse are to use the mouse in close to the keyboard, so that there is no outstretched arm, takes the strain off the arm. We can try a
different mouse which gets the wrist into a more relaxed position. And then there is this mouse, which is the hand shoe mouse. Your whole hand rests on it, including your wrist, and it encourages the movement of the whole arm, a bit like stirring the pot, which means the wrist and forearm are relaxed as you are using the mouse. Now the scroll wheel (just use the scroll wheel there) – to reduce the action in these tendons from the scroll wheel you can leave that hand alone and use the arrow keys with the other hand to move the page up and down.

To eliminate reaching for the mouse altogether, you might like to try an inline mouse. The mouse is the rolling bar here, which moves side to side, up and down, and then you can click it if you like. So using this inline mouse you are keeping the wrist in a neutral position, forearms relaxed and hands relaxed.

A wrist rest is a useful desk accessory as long as you are only using it for resting. As you type your wrists should be floating above the wrist rest, and as you rest you come down onto the wrist rest.

Do you have a paperwork component to your work? Do you write like this? Twisted neck, forward head, reaching arm. Or do you write like this? Head down, bent neck, curved back. Maybe you type like this – reaching out, poking chin, turtle back. If so, you need a microdesk. This is not your traditional document holder. It’s a study acrylic platform. It’s height adjustable and slope adjustable. It sits above the function keys of your keyboard so there’s not a big reach to get over to write on your paperwork. The microdesk also supplies a really good elevated work surface for you to use other products like your calculator, your smart phone or a mobile computer device. It keeps you working in a neutral posture as you use these products.

A footrest is a great tool for helping relieve leg symptoms. By raising the feet you are taking the weight of the thigh off the seat and this helps your circulation. It also helps you push your back back into the back of the chair so your lumbar spine is in a good neutral position, which effects the nerves going down your leg.

Using your smart phone in a poor position with your head slid forwards and down is a classic cause of pain in the neck. You need to try and keep your head on top. Drop your chin a little bit, you can tilt down, but you’ve still got a straight neck, and bring your phone up to you so that you are reading easily but you are not tilting your head down.

Do you ever use the phone in this position? Ouch! This is a great cause of neck pain. To rectify it use a headset or use a speaker phone.